

Egypt E-Alert

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A Peace Plan Within Our Grasp
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It's been 10 long years since the Palestinians and Israelis last came close to establishing a permanent peace, in January 2001 at Taba in Egypt. During my career in the Egyptian Air Force, I saw the tragic toll of war between the Arabs and Israel. As president of Egypt, I have endured many ups and downs in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Egypt's decision to be the first Arab state to make peace with Israel claimed the life of my predecessor, Anwar el-Sadat. Ever since the day in 1981 that I witnessed his assassination by extremists, I have tried to turn the dream of a permanent peace in the Middle East into a reality.

Now, after a nearly two-year hiatus in direct negotiations, we are opening yet another chapter in this long history. Many claim that this new round of talks — which begins with meetings between President Obama; Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel; the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas; King Abdullah of Jordan; and myself here on Wednesday — is doomed to fail like all the others.

However, President Obama's determined involvement has revived our hopes for peace and we must seize this opportunity. The broad parameters of a permanent Palestinian-Israeli settlement are already clear: the creation of a Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 with Jerusalem as a capital for both Israel and Palestine. Previous negotiations have already resolved many of the details on the final status of refugees, borders, Jerusalem and security.

The biggest obstacle that now stands in the way of success is psychological: the cumulative effect of years of violence and the expansion of Israeli settlements have led to a collapse of trust on both sides. For the talks to succeed, we must rebuild trust and a sense of security.

How do we do this?

First, we must safeguard the peace process from further outbreaks of violence. To that end Egypt stands ready to resume its efforts to resolve the many difficult issues surrounding Gaza: mediating a prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas, which controls Gaza, bringing an end to Israel's blockade and fostering a reconciliation between Hamas and its rival Fatah, which controls the West Bank. All this is critical to achieving a two-state solution. The Palestinians cannot make peace with a house divided. If Gaza is excluded from the framework of peace, it will remain a source of conflict, undermining any final settlement.

For an Israeli-Palestinian peace to succeed, it must also be embedded in a broader regional peace between Israel and the Arab world. The Arab Peace Initiative, endorsed by all Arab states, offers Israel peace and normalization in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from Arab territory and a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue. But in the interim both sides must show that this dream is within reach. Arab nations should continue to demonstrate the seriousness of their peace initiative with steps that address the hopes and concerns of ordinary Israelis.

For its part, Israel should make no mistake: settlements and peace are incompatible, as they deepen the occupation that Palestinians seek to end. A complete halt to Israel's settlement expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is critical if the negotiations are to succeed, starting with an extension of Israel's moratorium on settlement-building, which expires this month.

For both sides trust can be built only on tangible security. Security, however, cannot be a justification for Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian land, as it undermines the cardinal principle of land for peace. I recognize that Israel has legitimate security needs, needs that can be reconciled with the Palestinians' just demand for a complete withdrawal from occupied territory. Egypt believes that the presence of an international force in the West Bank, to be stationed for a period to be agreed upon by the parties, could give both sides the confidence and security they seek.

Finally, Egypt stands ready to host the subsequent rounds of negotiations. Every major Palestinian-Israeli agreement has been reached with active Egyptian involvement, in close collaboration with the United States. The 2001 talks in Taba, on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea, were the closest that the two sides have ever come to an agreement to end the conflict. Let us pick up where we left off, and hope that the spirit of engagement that accompanied those last talks engenders success.

We live in a world that is suffering from the bitter lash of extremism. A permanent peace between Israel and the Palestinians would bring the light of hope to the Middle East and to people everywhere. As someone who has witnessed both the ravages of war and the hope for peace, I appeal to all sides to make this new round of negotiations the one that succeeds.

Hosni Mubarak is the president of Egypt.

President Mubarak's editorial can also be found [here](#).

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